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It would always be Tom and Claudia’s special place, no matter where life took them…

“Meet you at the kissing gate.”

In her ear, Tom’s voice was warm, and Claudia could picture his blue eyes and the way his cheeks crinkled up around them as the wide grin spread across his face.

“I’ll be there,” she promised.

Tom’s words echoed in her head long after they’d ended the call: “Meet you at the kissing gate.”

It was their place, and had been ever since they'd found it when they were eight years old.

Tom and Claudia weren't exactly boy and girl next door, but when you lived in a village with no more than 30 houses, everyone was a close neighbour.

The youngsters found themselves the only two children starting at the tiny primary school when they were five.

"Claudia and Tom, you'll sit together," their teacher told them.

They smiled shyly at each other.

"Hi, Tom," Claudia whispered.

“Hello,” he replied with a gappy grin.

Thrown together like that, it had crossed Claudia’s mind more than once that it was lucky they even liked each other, let alone had become the tightest of friends.

By eight years old they were spreading their wings, exploring a gradually widening territory beyond their village.

The fields, the woodland, the network of rough tracks – it became their adventure playground.

“Bet you can’t climb this high,” Tom dared her from a branch above her head.

His voice squeaked slightly, betraying the limits of his own courage.

“I don’t want to anyway,” Claudia told him, searching for sight of the woodpecker she could hear rat-tat-tatting somewhere nearby.

Even so, she kept one eye on Tom until he was safely back on the ground.

“You would have been scared,” he told her, his eyes sparkling with bravado.

“I know,” she replied with a shrug. “Race you to the stream!”

At ten they were still inseparable, still each other’s shadow, and their territory was expanding.

“Let’s go this way,” Claudia suggested one day, pointing to where the grass had been flattened into a well-worn path along two edges of a field.

“Where does it go?” Tom asked, following as she scrambled over the dry-stone wall.

The answer was to the kissing gate, though they didn’t know to call it that when they first came upon the wrought-iron framework.

“What is it?” Tom asked, swinging the old metal gate one way to step into the U-shaped enclosure, then flipping it to step through to the other side.

“I don’t know,” Claudia replied, mirroring his action.

They tried it a few more times.

“Why’s it so complicated?”

“I don’t know,” Claudia said again. “It’s a mystery!”

And boy, did they like a mystery!

It was Claudia’s dad who solved it for them.

“Ah, you found the old kissing gate,” he told her over the tea

table that evening. “People can pass through but animals can’t.

“Mind you, I haven’t seen any livestock in that field for years,” he went on, adding another dollop of brown sauce to his chips.

“What’s it got to do with kissing?” Claudia asked.

Her mum and dad’s eyes met, then they exchanged a shrug.

“I don’t know,” Dad admitted. “It’s just always been called that.”

So that was one mystery solved, but now she’d found another one.

She and Tom met on her doorstep after tea and compared notes.

“My mum said the same,” he told her. “About animals, I mean. Let’s look it up.”

She fetched her laptop and they hunched over it, sitting side by side right there on the doorstep.

“Here it is,” she said, pointing at the screen, then read the words aloud.

“The term derives from the fact that the gate ‘kisses’ the stops at the two extremes of its travel.”

She looked up.

“Well, that’s boring,” she declared. “It hasn’t got anything to do with kissing at all.”

Their eyes locked, and suddenly the air was charged with something neither of them understood.

They were twelve and up at the big school when that “something” began to make sense.

“Is he your boyfriend?” the girls in her class asked her when they saw Tom waiting for her to get the bus back home.

“No,” Claudia retorted, blushing, but it made her wonder. Was he?

As they shared the journey home, Tom was full of the wonders of the geography class, and the video Mr McDonald had shown them of emperor penguins in the Antarctic.

“Did you know emperor penguins can hold their breath under water for up to twenty-two minutes?” he enthused. “I can’t hold mine for two!”

She listened and looked at him, and realised he wasn’t quite the wee boy she’d always known.

He was growing tall and lean, and good-looking. She’d never noticed that.

Now she had, she felt a new awkwardness with him.

“What are you staring at me like that for?” he asked.

“Sorry,” Claudia replied, blushing and looking away. “I was just thinking about something.”

They turned thirteen, then fourteen.

Tom’s love of geography had grown into a real passion, while Claudia had found she had a talent for languages.

They didn’t share many classes at school, but back in the village they still spent all their time together, and the kissing gate was “their” place.

They’d sit on its metal bars, legs dangling, talking about school, or Tom’s hockey team, or the

computer game everyone was playing, or the music they were listening to.

“Try this,” Tom suggested, leaning over and plugging one of his earbuds into her ear. “Rory told me about them.”

She listened for a moment, then smiled as they nodded along in unison.

“I like it,” she said, and handed the earbud back.

“They’re playing a gig in town at the city hall next month. Mum said she’d buy me a ticket for my birthday.”

Tom hesitated, then spoke in a rush.

“She said she’d buy you one, too, if you wanted to come.”

Suddenly his face flushed scarlet, and there was that “something” crackling in the air again.

“OK,” Claudia agreed, feeling her own face burn.

So the pair of them went to the gig together, dropped off at the end of the street by Tom’s mum.

“Don’t forget to phone when you come out and I’ll meet you back here,” she told them yet again.

She looked at them through the rearview mirror as they stared out at the streams of youngsters.

It was their first live concert, and they were both in a state of high excitement.

It was as they ran towards the hall that Tom looked at Claudia, laughing gleefully, and grasped her hand.

Next day, they went back to the kissing gate.

Tom was unusually quiet beside her while she chattered on about the gig.

Finally, when she stopped to draw breath, he turned to her.

“Will you be my girlfriend?” he asked without preamble.

She didn’t even have to think about it.

“OK.” She nodded.

He smiled and draped his arm around her and tugged slightly.

And it was there, perched awkwardly on the bars of the kissing gate, a gusty breeze swirling around them, that their lips met for the first time.

Claudia couldn’t imagine a more romantic moment.

Girlfriend and boyfriend they were for the rest of their school days, but as they turned eighteen it was decision time.

“I’ve got a place at university,” Tom told her the second she opened the door to him. “How about you?”

“Me, too.”

“Let’s go.”

She didn’t have to ask where.

They ambled up to the kissing gate, where they assumed their usual perch, atop the gate, his arm a warm, comforting weight around her shoulders.

“Did you get your first choice?” Claudia asked.

Tom nodded.

“Exeter.”

“That’s a long way from here.”

She didn’t say “from me”, but he seemed to sense it.

“I know.” He raised his shoulders in a rueful shrug. “But you won’t be here anyway, will you? Where did you get?”

“Aberdeen.” Her first choice, too.

They let that sink in, visualising the tortuous road and rail links between the two cities.

They had made a pact when it came time for making their choices and submitting their university applications. Heads must rule hearts.

Tom wanted to pursue his interest in nature and, ultimately, penguins in particular.

Who would have thought that Tom’s discovery of how long penguins could breathe underwater would evolve into his passion? It had led to a course in marine biology.

Claudia, meanwhile, loved words: reading them, writing them, understanding them. What else

would she study but English literature?

They could have found their courses at the same university. That was what their hearts wanted.

But the courses that were the very best match to their individual talents? This was where their heads sent them to opposite ends of the country.

Tom rested his head against hers.

“Exciting times,” he said in a low voice.

They were going off in different directions, literally and figuratively.

“I love you, Tom. I don’t want anyone else,” she insisted.

“Me, neither,” he replied.

Their eyes met.

“We’ve never known anyone but each other,” she pointed out, and Tom agreed.

They made a second pact: if either of them met someone else, they had to follow their heart.

Tom’s arm tightened around her shoulders and she felt loved and secure.

Off they went to their separate universities.

Life was busy, filled with hard work and fun.

So many exciting new places and people to discover.

Anyone overhearing their frequent video calls would have wondered how they ever knew what the other was saying as they babbled over each other.

“And then Sandra – I told you about Sandra, with the crazy purple hair? – had this mad idea to go swimming in the sea. In October!”

“Dek and Robbo and me went diving last week! It was wild!”

“You would have loved it!” They both said that often.

Always they signed off with, “Love you.”

Their years settled into a rhythm of term-time separations punctuated by holidays and trips back home.

Of course, first stop was always the kissing gate.

Claudia might notice he was growing broader, more ruggedly attractive.

He might notice how pretty she was, her hair long, then short, then long again.

They never said how much they'd missed each other – somehow that seemed against their pact – but it was in the eagerness of their reunion, the tightness of that first embrace.

The effervescent energy of their first year away gave way to a more focused relishing of everything university had to offer.

"There's this one lecturer. Sophie. She's brilliant. If I can learn even half of what she knows . . ."

"I've got one like that this year, too. Pippa. Feels like I'd need a lifetime to catch up with her."

Friends’ names came and went in their exchanges.

They might listen closely for one who lingered, or who was spoken of in a softer tone, but by the time they reached their final years and their final exams they were still looking forward to being together again.

Then what? What might their next chapter bring?

The kissing gate heard it all first.

“Claud, you won’t believe it! I’ve been offered the most amazing opportunity!” The words flooded out of Tom in a torrent.

“My lecturer, Sophie, is heading a research project in the Antarctic. There’s a place for me if I want it.”

His voice was almost a squeal.

“As if I’d say no!”

His eyes had been darting all over the familiar landscape, lit a thousand shades of green now in the summer sun, but they swivelled to rest on Claudia.

“It means I’d be away for another two years.”

His arm tightened round her shoulders.

“Two more years. What do you think, Claud? I’ll stay if you want me to.”

Claudia made herself smile brightly.

“Don’t be daft! It’s the chance of a lifetime.”

Claudia would be forging her own career path, teaching English, hoping to inspire the next generation to love words the way her teachers had inspired her.

“I’ve been offered a post at Cliffbay,” she told him.

“Your dream school? Clever you!” It was said somewhere above her

head as he squeezed her in a tight hug.

“So we’re good?” he asked, drawing back.

“Always,” she assured him.

“I love you, Claudia. Two years’ll soon pass,” he said, pulling her close again.

And it did. Of course, there were fewer visits home. For Tom, anyway. Logistically it wasn’t so easy.

But they still babbled nonstop on their video calls, sharing experiences, worries, successes, hopes and dreams.

No-one understood Claudia like Tom. No-one got Tom like Claudia.

Claudia loved teaching, as she’d known she would, and was making loads of new friends through it.

Tom was the opposite, having gone from teeming university life to the relative isolation of the small research station.

He was thriving on the experience.

His fascination with the work seemed to balance her busy social life in making the time whizz by, so that it was with some surprise that they realised his two years away were coming to an end.

“I’ll be home next month. I can’t believe it.” He grinned at her through the video screen. “I can’t wait to see you.”

“Me, too.”

Now Tom was home, and Claudia was on her way to meet him at the kissing gate.

It was time to turn the page on their next chapter.

The sun was shining and a soft breeze blew strands of her hair across her eyes.

Again and again she reached up a finger to hook them behind her ear.

It happened again as she neared their special place, blinding her so that she took a moment to spot him.

He was already perched on the metal bars, but leapt off and ran to meet her the moment he caught sight of her.

“Claud!” His arms wrapped tight around her. “Oh, I’ve missed you!”

“Me, too.” She mumbled it into the coarse wool of his sweater.

Together they walked back to the gate.

He reached out a helping hand as she scrambled up on to the familiar perch.

They sat there, relishing the moment, but there was a nervous energy underlying the silence.

Tom’s knee was bouncing restlessly as he gazed straight ahead.

Claudia twirled a long strand of hair round and round her finger.

Finally Tom drew in a breath.

“You know I love you, Claud,” he began, his face uncharacteristically serious.

“And I love you, Tom,” she replied.

“But –” They said it together, then stopped, laughing.

“You first,” Tom prompted her, nudging her elbow with his.

Claudia raised her shoulders in a tiny shrug.

“I’ve met someone.” She could hardly believe she was saying these words to Tom. She’d loved him since she was eight years old.

“Me, too!” It burst from him on the whoosh of a sigh.

Claudia could have fainted with the relief.

“Really?”

“Really.” He nodded vigorously. “Her name’s Molly. She’s Canadian.

“She joined the team three months ago. She’s more of a nerd about penguins than I am. You?”

“Will. He’s Tasmin’s brother – you know, Tasmin who gives me a lift to school every day? We just clicked.

“So, you and Molly – it’s serious?” Claudia asked.

“I think it could be,” he admitted, his voice soft with something she’d never heard before. “It already is. You?”

Slowly she nodded, her heart filling with the sparkling warmth she felt whenever she thought about Will.

“I think so, too.”

He laughed, shaking his head.

“What are the chances?” he asked. “After all these years . . .”

They sat there, side by side on the kissing gate, his arm heavy round her shoulders.

“I always thought it would be us, you know?” he murmured.

“I know.”

“Maybe if I hadn’t gone away . . .”

She shook her head.

“It happened to me, too, and I stayed right here. It’s fate, I guess.”

The sun was warm in their faces, and Claudia closed her eyes.

Her head tilted to lean against his.

“I’ll always love you, Tom. You know that, don’t you?”

His arm tightened.

“Me, too. But this is . . .”

“Different?” she suggested, and he nodded.

“So different.”

They smiled at each other.

“Be happy, little one,” he murmured.

“You, too, Tom. You, too.”